

Isaiah 61. 10 – 62. 3

Galatians 4. 4-7

Luke 2. 21-40

If you take a good look in the cradle, you will see that the doll which is here as the infant Jesus is brown. Apparently, someone last year took offence that the baby Jesus had brown skin. A brown baby Jesus. What a horror!

The first year of my time as a ministry candidate was the year 2000. The theological college, along with the history department of Melbourne University, organised a joint conference to mark, in theory, 2000 years of the life of the church. As a way of recognising Christianity's roots in Judaism, the keynote speaker was a Jewish man Bad Gen Meier, the editor at the time of the Australian Jewish News. Bad was born in Baghdad. His family had emigrated to Australia in the 1940s following the Nazi occupation and the subsequent years when Jews, who had been resident in Iraq for more than 2500 years, had been driven out of the country. Bad was descended from Jews who had been taken to Babylon in the 6th century BCE, six hundred years before Jesus lived, and had remained in Iraq after many returned to Israel after the overthrow of the Babylonian Empire. Bad Gen Meier had a dark skinned, craggy, deeply lined face. His genetic heritage was deeply Jewish, stretching back 2500 years. I felt I could be looking at an old Jesus, or an old, weather-beaten Joseph.

Many of us, too many of us, grew up with images of a very pallid Jesus: white, fine-boned, nicely groomed and, quite possibly, blue-eyed. But Jesus was born a middle-eastern Jew and died a Jew. He didn't come to begin a new religion; he found himself working to reform and revitalise the faith he was born into, worshipping the God his ancestors had been worshipping for hundreds of years.

The additional confusion we have probably been given of the roots of Christianity is that of Paul – the untimely born apostle, as he called himself. I can recall the impression from childhood that what took place for Paul on the road to Damascus was a conversion; the suggestion being – a conversion from Judaism to Christianity. Paul also was born a Jew and died a faithful Jew. He did, though, come to a radical transformation of his understanding of the reach and embrace of God – to include all people, but he remained a faithful Jew to the end.

He writes to the early church in Rome: *I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.* ²*God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.*

But as we celebrate the birth of this Jewish child, we are living in a deeply difficult time in which to read the Old Testament and the longings throughout its pages of the people of Israel; many of these longings are focussed on Mount Zion. Mount Zion is the hill or hills where Jerusalem is located. It is the metaphor in some sense for the meeting place of earth and heaven. And yet, we also know from the scriptures, Mt Zion is also the focus point of a nation which repeatedly loses

its way in its faithfulness toward the God; the God who called this people from slavery to freedom.

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.

Let Israel be glad in its Maker;
let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.

Let Mount Zion be glad,
let the towns* of Judah rejoice
because of your judgements.

I can recall from my teenage years watching – indeed – repeatedly watching a film made in 1970 entitled *His Land*, where the squeaky-clean Cliff Richard along with Cliff Barrows, the Billy Graham crusade music leader, sang their way through the Holy Land, and recited their way through the Old Testament, to demonstrate that the reestablishment of the State of Israel was the fulfillment of ancient prophecies. It seemed like a good idea to an impressionable teenager; now I'm far from sure about this.

We meet the deeply faithful Simeon and Anna today. Simeon, Luke tells us, has been waiting for the consolation of Israel and that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

What was it that Simeon was longing for. It's not clear what this might be. Was Simeon longing for a consolation resembling the modern state of Israel? Bristling, armed to the teeth, racist, characterised by apartheid and propped up by the superpower of the time. I would have thought not. That doesn't seem to be the character of Simeon's waiting, his faithful presence in the temple each day.

He has been waiting, waiting for many years for this consolation but there is not an ease about what this will look like, because he has an ominous sense of the calling for Jesus: *This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*' Already here in the early weeks of Jesus' life, the cross looms.

It feels like the contemporary events in Israel have divided the world between those who support and accept what Israel is doing and those who are utterly appalled and see their actions as out of all proportion; recognising that what Hamas did is an inevitable outcome of the system of apartheid which operates against Palestinians. Those who question what is taking place are, too often, quickly accused of antisemitism. As though this accusation should end the criticism, once and for all; shut down any question of the moral right to be acting as Israel is.

All of the loud push and shove around these difficult questions in the media overshadow the many grassroots movements around the world working towards peace and justice in Israel. The

scores of groups of Jews, Palestinians and Christians working together toward peace and the building of community. The groups of Jews around the world standing up and saying: what the State of Israel is doing against the people of Gaza is not in my name; it is not an expression of a true and faithful Judaism. Jews who are saying: I am not a Zionist; I don't believe the State of Israel should have been established. All people working away in their small corner; faithfully, as Simeon was faithful.

All of this tension and trauma playing out at present is the legacy of the 20th century and the culmination of centuries of antisemitism which came to a crescendo in the Holocaust. Jews had been hated and victimised and pushed from place to place around Europe for centuries – it was if they were the eternal victim; the always-ready-at-hand victims when societies were under stress and conflict. *It must be the Jews who have brought this upon us*, went the logic. Hitler and the Nazis supercharged and systematised it. Once and for all enacting a final solution. All of that horror didn't come out of nowhere but had been building for centuries. Tragically, the church, too often provided a perverted theological rationale for all of this tragedy.

This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. Jesus was always clear about that people's behaviours is an expression of what lies in the heart. Maybe our simplest measure of this might be his saying: *by your fruits shall you know them.*

The words from Malcolm Gordon tenderly express the humble waiting of Simeon; his strength is gone but he hasn't descended into despair or cynicism:

He's just a small child
From nowhere special
But something tells me, this is it

My heart's desire
My world's salvation
A candle in this darkness has been lit

This is the light which has been born in the darkness and which we continue to mark and celebrate at Christmas. The darkness will not and cannot overcome it and we continue to keep alive the flame. We light a flame for the people and Gaza, the children, the women, the men, the doctors and other medicos, the Hamas fighters, the Israeli soldiers, the men and women dispossessing Palestinians from ancient lands and homes, the Palestinians made homeless; longing for their consolation.

Come Lord Jesus we pray and seek to embody as we are able – with hope, seeking peace, committed to joy, arising out of love. Come Lord Jesus.

Andrew Boyle